

Adapted from CHAPTER 2—Thomas Lickona, *CHARACTER MATTERS: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (Simon & Schuster, 2004)

RAISING CHILDREN OF CHARACTER

What used to happen to 10th-graders is now routine among 8th-graders. Trouble with the law. Promiscuity. Pregnancy. Parties with alcohol and without adults in attendance. Drugs.

—A middle-school counselor¹

Parents are powerful people. The worst mistake they can make is to underestimate their influence.

—A rabbi

A mother whose daughter attends a private high school recounted a conversation she had with another mother whose daughter attends a different private school. The second mother said, “We’re so relieved about the prom. The dance is at the hotel, the parties afterwards are at the hotel, and the kids all have rooms at the hotel for the night.”

The first mother swallowed hard and said, “But don’t you realize the signal that sends to kids—what it gives them permission to do?”

The second mother sighed and said, “Well, at least they’re not drinking and driving.”

In reporting this exchange the first mother commented: “We draw a line, and then we cross that. We draw another line, and then we cross that. Pretty soon we’ve compromised our standards to the point of disappearing.”

Parenting, including the moral standards we teach and uphold, has a profound impact on our children’s moral development and behavior. When we do not set high standards, we abandon our kids to their immature desires and the negative pressures of the peer group and culture.

Our parenting affects every area of our children's growth, including their ability to learn and to do the disciplined work of school. In their 1992 book *America's Smallest School: The Family*, educators Paul Barton and Richard Coley predicted the failure of school reform if it ignored a basic fact: The family is the cradle of learning. They pointed out that student achievement improves when there are two parents in the home; when children are well cared for and feel secure; when the family environment is intellectually stimulating; when parents encourage self-regulation and perseverance; and when they limit TV, monitor homework, and ensure regular school attendance.²

In these vital areas, however, growing numbers of families are not meeting children's needs. In general, children today arrive at school less ready to learn. The psychologist Robert Evans observes that at the very time teachers face mounting pressures to increase student achievement, they have to cope with the decline of things they used to take for granted: students' attention, respect for authority, rudimentary social skills, and willingness to work.³

In all kinds of families, including affluent and intact families, parents are spending less time with their children, providing less guidance, and setting fewer limits. Despite the fact that heavy television viewing increases children's aggression and lowers academic performance, parents allow their children to devote more time to television than to school and homework combined. Three-quarters of 6th-graders have TVs in their bedrooms.⁴

Even the most competent and conscientious parents often struggle to get through the week and are beset by feelings of failure. Parenting is inherently hard work. We get our training on the job. The job is harder than ever because the family has fewer allies (such as the extended family and cohesive neighborhoods) and more enemies (such as a toxic media culture, other parents who are permissive, and an economy that doesn't pay a living wage). Because families are more stressed than ever, and because there are many more negative forces in our children's lives, parents need to be more intentional than in past generations about creating a family life and more vigilant about raising a moral child. Good character will not be absorbed from our current moral environment.

What are practical principles of parenting that can guide us in the demanding but rewarding work of raising children of character?

1. MAKE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT A HIGH PRIORITY

One of my college students, reflecting on her character development, wrote: "I was an only child, and my parents let me have my own way most of the time. I know they wanted to show how much they loved me. But I have struggled with selfishness my whole life."

The educator James Stenson observes: “Successful parents see themselves as raising adults. They view their children as adults-in-the-making.”⁵

This means we need to take the long view. Many parents today attach a great deal of importance to their children’s getting good grades and having high self-esteem. In fact, however, our children’s character—the kind of person they are becoming—is much more important to leading a good and fulfilling life. Our focus as parents should therefore be: What kind of character do we want our children to possess when they are grown men and women? Will they be hard-working, generous, and responsible adults? Will they make loving husbands and wives, and capable mothers and fathers? How is our approach to parenting likely to affect these outcomes?

Our character, in large measure, consists of our habits—habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of behavior. The habits we form as children and adolescents often persist into adulthood. Imagine that your children will be asked someday, “How did your parents influence your character development?” What do you hope they will say?

2. BE AN AUTHORITATIVE PARENT

Parents must have a strong sense of their moral authority—of having the right to be respected and obeyed.

In the 1960s, many adults lost confidence in their moral authority. During this same period, Diana Baumrind, a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, began to do research showing that adult authority, properly exercised, is vital to children's and teenagers’ moral development.

By observing families first-hand, Baumrind identified three styles of parenting: *authoritative*, *authoritarian*, and *permissive*. Authoritarian parents used a lot of commands and threats but little reasoning. Permissive parents were high on affection but low on authority. By contrast, *authoritative* parents combined confident authority with reasoning, fairness, and love:

The child is directed firmly, consistently, and rationally; the parent both explains reasons behind demands and encourages give and take; the parent uses power [to enforce rules and commands] when necessary; the parent values both obedience to adult requirements and independence in the child; the parent sets standards and enforces them firmly but does not regard self as infallible; the parent listens to the child but does not base decisions solely on the child's desires. ⁶

Baumrind initially studied preschoolers and followed them until they were nine. Her central finding: The most self-confident and socially responsible children had

authoritative parents.⁷

Subsequent studies documented the effectiveness of authoritative parenting with teens. Temple University psychologist Lawrence Steinberg and colleagues studied 20,000 adolescents and their families in nine different communities across America. They found that teens with *authoritative* parents were the most confident, persevering, and successful in school and the least likely to abuse drugs or alcohol.⁸

To establish an authoritative parenting style—and it’s never too late to start—we should aim to have a zero tolerance policy for disrespectful speech and behavior. Nearly all children will slip into disrespect now and then, but when they do, they need immediate corrective feedback (“What is your tone of voice?”, “You are not allowed to speak to me in that way, even if you’re upset”). If we do not firmly and consistently correct such behavior, we will find our tolerance zone for disrespect getting wider and wider—and our children’s disrespectful attitudes getting steadily worse. If we allow kids of any age to get away with being disrespectful, they will quickly lose respect for our moral authority. And if they don’t respect our moral authority, they won’t respect our rules, example, or moral teachings. They are also likely to be less teachable by other adults.

3. LOVE CHILDREN

Love makes our children feel secure, significant, and valuable. When they feel loved, they become emotionally attached to us. That attachment makes them responsive to our authority and receptive to our values.

Love means spending time with kids. One-on-one time is especially important. We need emotionally intimate time and shared activity to keep any relationship—between spouses, between parents and kids—strong and growing.

To protect one-on-one time, we need to plan it. I know a school superintendent, a father of four, who can show you in his appointment book which child he’ll be spending the coming Saturday afternoon with. “If I didn’t schedule that time,” he says, “it wouldn’t happen.” “To make sure we have family time,” a mother says, “we have a rule. On two days a week, there are no outside activities.”

The time we spend with our children will be among their most treasured memories. Here is how the late Christian Barnard, originator of the heart transplant, remembers the times with his father.

Whenever we were ill, my father got up late at night to doctor us. I suffered from festering toenails that pained so much I would cry in bed. My father used to draw out the fester with a poultice made of milk and bread crumbs or Sunlight soap and sugar.

And when I had a cold, he would rub my chest with Vicks and cover it with a red flannel cloth. Sunday afternoons we walked together to the top of the hill by the dam. Once there, he would sit on a rock and look down at the town below us. Then I would tell my problems to my father, and he would speak of his to me.

Quantity of time is as important as quality. Says a father of three: "It's very important to be with your kids in everyday situations. That's when you see how they're behaving, what attitudes they're picking up. That's when you get to monitor behavior: 'Don't talk to your mother like that,' 'Is that any way to treat your little brother?'"

Love as Communication

The quality of our love often comes down to the quality of our communication. Good communication doesn't happen automatically simply because we make the time for it. We often need to do something deliberate to bring about a meaningful exchange of thoughts and experiences.

When our older son Mark was 13, I became frustrated with the fact that our exchanges typically consisted of my asking questions and his giving monosyllabic answers. ("How was school?" "Fine." "How'd the game go?" "Great.") One day, in exasperation, I said: "You know, someday I'd like to have a real conversation. I ask all the questions. It would be great if, for a change, you asked *me* a question."

He said, "Okay, Dad, how are your courses going this semester?" It was the first time I ever talked to him about my teaching. After that, even if we had only five minutes in the car, we'd do "back-and-forth questions": I'd ask him one (e.g., "What was the best part and the worst part of your day?"), he'd ask me one (often the same question), and so on. It became a family tradition.

How can we make time for the family meal and develop its potential for meaningful communication? John and Kathy Colligan of Endwell, New York had five children, and they and their kids all had the usual out-of-home commitments (games, lessons, meetings, etc.). But they made a decision to have a daily family meal. Kathy explains:

We had to vary the time between 4:30 and 8:30 depending on the season, sports, and so on. We asked the kids to make this commitment. We took the phone off the hook. The TV was off. We made a rule that only positive conversation would be allowed—no criticism, carping, or tattling. We began with grace, asking Jesus to be present at the table with us. We pointed out the specialness of each person—which got us looking at the goodness in each other. At first, the kids complained fiercely. But now they are all parents themselves, and we have asked each of them independently, "What are the things we did as a family that you want to do with your own children?" All have said, "The family meal."

To make the family meal a time for good discussion, it helps to have a “topic.” Sample topics: “What’s something you did today that you feel good about?” “What was something that happened today that never happened before?” “What is something you’re looking forward to?” “Who has a problem the rest of the family might be able to help with?”

In our family, we’d sometimes clip out a letter to an advice columnist and read it aloud—but not the answer. For example: “I’m 15, I’m pregnant, and I’m scared to death to tell my folks. What should I do?” We’d go around the table and each say what advice we thought the columnist should give—and only then would we read the answer. These discussions gave us a good vehicle for sharing our deepest beliefs and values.

Love as Sacrifice

To love one’s children is to be willing to make sacrifices for their sake. A wise person once said, “Being a responsible parent means putting yourself second for a quarter of a century.” There is often no greater sacrifice, no greater act of love for one’s children, than to endure the inevitable trials of marriage. Said one mother: “The most important thing parents can do for their children is to love each other and stay together.”

About a million children see their parents divorce each year. In a major shift from a generation ago, however, both secular and religious marriage counselors are now urging married couples having problems to do everything possible to work out their difficulties and save their marriage. That advice is based on the experience of many couples who vastly underestimated the pain of divorce for both adults and children.

In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study*, researcher Judith Wallerstein documents in detail the often lasting psychological repercussions of marital and family breakdown. There are exceptions: Some children eventually emerge from the suffering of divorce stronger persons; some, as adults, are determined to make their own marriages last. But for a great many, time does not heal the wounds.

In his book *Endangered: Your Child In a Hostile World*, Johann Christoph Arnold quotes Cindy, a youth counselor living in Boston. She was five when her parents told her and her brothers and sisters that they would be getting a divorce.

Later that night I saw Dad walking out with a suitcase in hand, and his alarm clock with the cord wrapped around it. He looked at me and said, “Honey, remember, Daddy loves you.” And then he walked out. That memory is so vivid. What does it mean when a father tells his little girl, “I love you,” but then walks out on you? It’s even hard to trust that my husband really loves me. It’s like I’m still waiting for my father to come home.⁹

Marriages fail for many reasons, including child abuse, spousal violence, and infidelity. But we need to remember: Kids do better when they have two parents under the same roof. Parents parent better when there are two of them to support each other. The love between a mother and a father contributes greatly to a child's sense of security and overall well-being.¹⁰ And by staying together through good times and bad, we teach our children a vital life lesson about the meaning of commitment.

4. TEACH BY EXAMPLE

Teaching by example includes treating our children with love and respect, but it goes beyond that. It has to do with how we treat each other as spouses—something that children have countless opportunities to observe. When we fight, do we fight fair? What kind of language do we use? Do we reconcile soon, or stay angry? Healthy families, research shows, have reconciliation rituals that enable them to forgive and make up quickly.¹¹

Our example also has to do with how we treat and talk about others outside the family—relatives, friends, neighbors, and teachers. The mother who says in front of her child, “This is a dumb assignment” about homework a teacher has given, is modeling a disrespect that will not be lost on the child. “Disrespect,” says one parent educator, “usually begins in low-level ways. Kids become desensitized to it.”

These days, the most important example we set may be the stands we take—especially stands that are unpopular with our children or at odds with what other parents are permitting. What do we prohibit? Violent video games? TV shows and movies that contain sex, violence, or foul language? All forms of pornography? Music with lyrics that denigrate particular groups? Immodest dress? Parties where there's drinking? Prom overnights? Said a father: “Our daughter is the only one among her friends who is not going to the overnight beach party after the senior prom. She is very unhappy with us right now, but that's our decision.”

Do our kids know where we stand on the moral issues of the day—respect for life, war and peace, threats to the environment, the plight of the poor? If we've ever taken a stand in the workplace or public arena or even in a conversation with one other person, have we shared that with our children? Stands like these define our values. They let our children know what we care deeply about. That's essential if we hope to pass on our values or the importance of integrity in a life of character. If our kids never see us standing up for what we believe, never going against the tide, how can we expect them to have the courage to stand up to pressure from their peers?

5. MANAGE THE MORAL ENVIRONMENT

In previous generations, the family existed within a larger societal context that

generally supported the values parents were trying to teach their children.

No longer. Today, combating the social environment—in large part the creation of the media and a marketplace culture—is a never-ending battle. The journalist Amy Welborn comments on how the marketplace increasingly seeks to sexualize children: “You see it in the racks of clothes for girls from 7 on—the difficulty of finding an outfit that doesn’t scream ‘slut.’”¹²

The sexual corruption of children is arguably the most insidious attack on their innocence and character, but the media culture warps their values in other ways as well. Many parents are distressed by how materialistic their children are, never content with what they have. Increasingly, youth seek their self-esteem and identity in clothes or cars.

In Chapter 3, I recommend specific guidelines parents can use to try to manage the media environment—to control TV, movies, music, video games, and the Internet. The basic rule: Kids must ask permission for any given television show, video game, item to be downloaded from the Internet, etc.

Equally important, however, is taking an educational approach—*explaining* our moral objections to something rather than simply forbidding it. If we merely prohibit a TV program, movie, or CD without making clear our moral reasons for doing so, we’re likely to produce just resentment in our children rather than conscience development and self-regulation.

How to take an educational approach is illustrated by a mother whose 14-year-old daughter Kylene kept bugging her to be able to watch the popular TV comedy “Friends,” whose hip characters all sleep around. Kylene said all of her friends at school watched it, and she felt “totally out of it” because she didn’t. Her mother said sorry, but she didn’t approve of the values in the show.

Kylene wouldn’t quit. Finally, her mother said, “Okay, let’s watch one episode together.” A few minutes into the show, the mother said, “Let me tell you why I have a problem with what *she* just said to *him*.” A minute later, she said, “Let me tell you why I have a problem with what *he* just said to *her*.” At the end of the show, Kylene said, “Okay, Mom, I get it!” and that was the end of her nagging about “Friends.” The moral standard had been conveyed, concretely.

Managing the moral environment today also means a higher degree of supervision than it did in the past. A mother of 11- and 6-year-old girls, not knowing parents she could trust, said: “My children’s friends come over to our house nearly every day. They feel safe here. But I don’t allow my girls to go to other kids’ houses, strict as that may sound. I don’t know what the language will be there, what will be on the TV or VCR, whether there’ll be pornography on the coffee table, or whether mom will have a

boyfriend in the home.”

Said a mother to her 16-year-old daughter, who was leaving for a party (where the parents were going to be home): “I’ll call to see if you’re there. If you’re not, I’ll notify the police and report you as a missing person.” Her daughter said, “You wouldn’t.” The mother said, “I would.”

Parents who take pains to supervise their children can take heart from what the research shows: “Hands-on” parents—those who set rules and expectations, know about their children’s activities, friends, and behaviors, and monitor them in age-appropriate ways, have teens with lower rates of sexual activity as well as lower rates of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use than their peers.¹³

At the same time we’re working hard to protect our children from dangers, we should make an equal effort to expose them to what is uplifting, noble, and heroic. Somewhere in the evening paper there’s at least one example of integrity, courage, or compassion. The website www.teachwithmovies.com is a source of films that offer positive role models and matter for moral discussion. And there are hundreds of good books whose admirable characters will live in a child’s heart and imagination. *Books That Build Character* by William Kilpatrick provides an annotated bibliography of more than 300 books appropriate for different levels—early childhood, childhood, and adolescence.

6. USE DIRECT TEACHING TO FORM CONSCIENCE AND HABITS

We need to practice what we preach, but we also need to preach what we practice. Direct moral teaching helps to form a child’s conscience and habits of behavior.

“Say please and thank you.” “Don’t interrupt.” “Look at a person who’s speaking to you.” “Pick up your toys and clothes.” “Cover your mouth when you cough.” “Clear your dishes.” “Remember your telephone manners.” “Write or call to say thank-you when you receive a gift.” Literally hundreds of teachings like these communicate to children, “This is how we behave,” “This is how we live.” “Raising a civilized child,” quips columnist Judith Martin, “takes 20 years of constant teaching and another 10 of review.”

Direct teaching includes explaining why some things are right and others wrong. Why is it wrong to lie? Because lying destroys trust, and trust is the basis of any relationship. Why is it wrong to cheat? Because cheating is a lie—it deceives another person—and it’s unfair to all the people who aren’t cheating. This kind of moral reasoning helps children develop a conscience so they’ll be able to give themselves reasons why they should or shouldn’t do something. The inner voice of conscience becomes crucial when they’re tempted to do something wrong and we’re not around.

Our efforts to form a child's conscience should be proactive. We shouldn't wait for something to go wrong before teaching what's right. The great basketball coach John Wooden tells how his father instructed him and his brothers:

Dad had "two sets of threes." These were direct and simple rules aimed at how he felt we should conduct ourselves in life. The first set was about honesty: "Never lie. Never cheat. Never steal." My brothers and I knew what this meant and that Dad expected us to abide by it. The second set of threes was about dealing with adversity: "Don't whine. Don't complain. Don't make excuses." Dad's two sets of threes were a compass for me in trying to do the right thing and behaving in a proper manner.¹⁴

Direct moral instruction also includes teaching a child positive alternatives to the behavior we're trying to correct. When our first granddaughter Monica was an exuberant 3-year-old, she would interrupt an adult conversation—at the table or anywhere else—by saying, "Excuse me!" If that didn't gain her the floor, she'd repeat in rising volume, "Excuse me! *Excuse me!* EXCUSE me!" Her parents would then chide her for this, but it would happen again the next time. The solution was to teach her an alternative behavior: to silently touch the nearest adult's arm as a signal that she wished to speak. That adult would then nod to acknowledge her, and when the adult speaking was done, Monica would take her turn. This, of course, took patient reminders and practice, as establishing new behaviors always does.

Direct teaching can also take the form of guiding our children to another source of wisdom—giving them a good book, a pamphlet, or another helpful resource that speaks to the issue at hand. Teens, especially, may be more likely to see the validity of a parent's perspective when it's confirmed by another source. A Canadian mother told me she was stunned and at a loss for words when her 16-year-old daughter Lisa disclosed that she and her boyfriend were thinking of having sex. When the mother said, "But sex is meant for love," Lisa replied, "But we *do* love each other, and this is how we want to express it." To help her daughter reflect on the meaning of love, I suggested she give her a pamphlet titled *Love Waits*. It reads:

Love is patient; love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices, choices that could change your lives forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a

mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it’s love, love waits.¹⁵

7. TEACH GOOD JUDGMENT

Good judgment is a big part of good character. Helping our children become thoughtful decision-makers goes beyond conscience formation (directly teaching what’s right and wrong and why). Developing our kids’ decision-making skills means teaching them certain questions or “tests” they can use to evaluate any given behavior. Should I let this person copy my homework? Go to a party that I know my parents wouldn’t approve of? Tell less than the whole truth if they ask where I’ve been? Participate in gossiping about a kid at school that my friends don’t like?

Here are nine ethical tests we can teach our children to apply:

1. ***The Golden Rule (reversibility) test:*** Would I want people to do this to me?
2. ***The fairness test:*** Is this fair to everybody who might be affected by what I say or do?
3. ***The what-if-everybody-did-this test:*** Would I like it if everyone else did this? Would I want to live in that kind of world?
4. ***The truth test:*** Does this action represent the whole truth and nothing but the truth?
5. ***The parents test:*** How would my parents feel if they found out I did this? What advice would they give me if I asked them if I should do it?
6. ***The religion test:*** Does this go against my religion?
7. ***The conscience test:*** Does this go against my conscience? Will I feel guilty afterwards?
8. ***The consequences test:*** Might this have bad consequences, such as damage to relationships or loss of self-respect, now or in the future? Might I come to regret doing this?
9. ***The front-page test:*** How would I feel if my action were reported on the front-page of my hometown paper?

Kids won’t, of course, apply all these tests to every moral decision they make. But even if they apply some of them, they’ll make better decisions than if they act on impulse

or without considered judgment. Even asking *one* of the above questions—about consequences, for example—could deter a behavior that brings harm to self and others. Interviewing Monica Lewinsky about her affair with President Clinton, Barbara Walters asked: “At any time, did you consider the possible consequences your actions might have for yourself, for the President, for his family, or for the country?” Lewinsky replied, “No, I did not.”

In addition to the nine ethical tests, there’s a problem-solving process we can teach our children to use when they’re faced with a moral dilemma where the best course of action isn’t immediately clear. For example, some kids at school are picking on another kid, but you’re afraid that if you tell an adult, it might just get worse for the kid and maybe they’ll turn on you. Or, you’ve been accepted into the popular crowd at school, but they don’t like the girl you’ve been best friends with and make it clear you have to choose between them and her. With these or any other difficult moral challenges, the following steps can aid decision-making:

1. **Consider alternatives.** What are different ways of trying to deal with this problem?
2. **Weigh consequences.** What are the likely good and bad results of the different alternatives for the people who would be affected, including myself?
3. **Identify the moral values.** What moral values are involved? Which ones are most important?
4. **Seek advice.** What person(s), such as parents, teachers, or an older sibling, could I ask for help in deciding what to do in this situation?
5. **Make a decision.** Which course of action does the best job of respecting the important moral values and producing good consequences?

Advice-seeking is especially important to stress with our children. They should know that even adults, if they are wise, don’t make important decisions—especially about tough problems—without seeking counsel from at least one person whose judgment they respect.

Finally, we should teach kids that important decisions require a clear mind and a calm emotional state. They shouldn’t be made when we’re tired, stressed, angry, or upset in any way. And they shouldn’t be made in a hurry. We will almost never regret taking more time to make an important decision. We may very well regret not taking enough time.

8. DISCIPLINE WISELY

A mother I once counseled said that dinners with her 2 ½-year-old son had become a nightmare. Jonathan would start out by refusing to come to the table. His parents would coax him to come. If they got him there, he would often refuse to eat. They would then promise him a nice dessert. He'd eat a little food and scream for dessert. They would bring out the dessert, sometimes trying to get him to alternate between spoons of dinner and spoons of dessert.

I suggested that they take charge of the situation by saying: "Jonathan, it's dinner time. You can eat with us, or play in your room. But if you don't eat now, there's no food later. No dinner, no bedtime snack. Do you understand? The rule is: *Put your dinner in your tummy, and you will get a snack that's yummy.* Now, you tell us the rule."

When Jonathan tested this rule, as I was sure he would, his parents had to be prepared to follow through, calmly and lovingly put him to bed without snack, and let him cry himself to sleep if necessary. That's exactly what happened the first night. The second night, and thereafter, Jonathan came to dinner without a fuss.

Although only two, Jonathan had learned an important character lesson: There are rules and consequences. In his parents' initial handling of the dinner situation, they didn't convey either. Once they did—offering him a clear choice ("Eat dinner with us or go to bed hungry")—he complied. He took a significant step toward fitting into a larger social world.

In many families, discipline is the area where moral training breaks down. Disciplining wisely means setting expectations, holding kids accountable to them, and responding to their lapses in a way that both *teaches what's right* and *motivates the child to do what's right*. This means discipline should be clear and firm but not harsh. If we're always barking and booming, yelling and screaming, our kids will be afraid of our anger rather than focused on what they did wrong and how to correct it. Discipline should convey our confidence that our children can do better and should nurture their capacity and will to be good—even when we're not around to scold them.

Sometimes a disciplinary consequence is needed to help children realize the seriousness of what they've done and motivate them not to do it again. In imposing consequences, however, many parents come down too hard in a moment of anger ("You're grounded for a week!"), later feel like a "meanie" especially when kids play the suffering victim, and end up going back on what they said—which undercuts their authority. A better approach is to ask a child, "What do *you* think is a fair consequence for what you did?" Most of the time, kids won't let themselves off easily. And if *they* come up with a fair consequence, they've served as their own judge and jury—better for their character development because they're taking responsibility for their actions. It's

also a good idea, whenever possible, to *anticipate* a problem and establish an agreed-upon consequence in advance (“What’s a fair consequence for not picking up your toys the next time I ask?” “That we lose them for the next day.”)

In many situations, restitution is a fitting moral consequence and teaches kids the important lesson that when you do something bad, you should do something good to make up for it. Restitution has the greatest value for children’s moral development when we require *them* to take responsibility for making things right by asking themselves, “What can I do to make up for what I did?”

Whenever possible, discipline should also teach empathy. The failure to empathize—to put yourself in the other person’s shoes—underlies many, if not most, hurtful actions. We can help kids develop empathy by asking questions that require them to take perspective: “How could you be helpful in this situation?” “Why am I upset with you?” “How does that make your sister feel?” “What could you do to make her feel better?”

Our children will remember how we responded to their moral transgressions. Catherine, now twenty-nine, says, “My dad was a strict but tender father. In tenth-grade, I had adopted the ungracious habit of referring to certain classmates as ‘losers.’ Dad took me aside and pointed out that it wasn’t right to dismiss anyone like that, as if they weren’t persons, as if they didn’t have a soul. That habit ended that day.”

A story that illustrates all the elements of disciplining wisely—teaching respect, fostering empathy, taking transgressions seriously, and requiring children to figure out how to make restitution—comes from Helena Zapletalova, my neighbor of many years who died this summer at the age of 92. One of seven children, Helena grew up in Moravia, Czechoslovakia. She said that when she was seven years old, after the death of her grandmother, her grandfather came to live with them.

My grandfather taught himself to carve and made toy horses for my four brothers. I said to him, “Please make something for me.” And so he spent a long time carving a doll for me. But when he gave it to me, I cried, “That’s an ugly doll! I don’t want that doll!”

My mother heard this and said to me, “Go to your room. I will come and talk with you.”

When my mother sat down with me, I said, “It *is* an ugly doll! Why are you angry at me for telling the truth?”

She answered, “You think that is the truth because you are not seeing with the eyes of the heart. If you use your heart’s eyes, you will see that your grandfather worked hard for weeks trying to please you. With every stroke of the knife, he was thinking of

you. This doll is full of love. I'm surprised you don't have eyes that can see that."

I said, "But it doesn't look like the dolls in the shops."

My mother said, "Anyone can buy those dolls. All you need is money. This doll was made for you, not for anyone else."

I felt ashamed and began to cry. My mother continued, "You have hurt your grandfather, and you have hurt me, because I love my father and I can see the love in his gift."

I said, "How can I make it right?" My mother said, "You didn't ask me before you insulted him, so don't ask me to tell you how to make it right. You will have to find the answer inside yourself."

She left me sitting on the edge of the bed. I thought and thought. It was a very hard problem for a little girl.

Finally, I went to my grandfather and said, "Grandfather, don't you think this doll would look nice if we painted on a face and some clothes and shoes?" He said, "What a good idea! Why didn't I think of that? Go and get your father's paints."

We painted the doll together, and it became my favorite toy.

Helena said that when she went to the University, she took the doll with her. Sometimes she would talk to the doll and say, "Why didn't I think more before I spoke out and hurt my friend's feelings?" And whenever she faced a hard problem, the doll would remind her to look inside herself to find the answer.

What did Helena's mother do that succeeded in turning Helena's ungrateful reaction to her grandfather's gift into a character lesson for life? First, she helped her understand all the love her grandfather had put into the doll—a love she could see if she looked at the doll "with the eyes of the heart." She developed Helena's empathy by making it clear that she had hurt her grandfather and, in hurting him, hurt her mother as well. Finally, she insisted that Helena take the responsibility for finding a way to make things right and thereby gave her confidence that she had the resources within herself to solve life's problems. (Encouraging our children to have this confidence in their own ability to solve problems, of course, can and should be combined with encouraging them to seek helpful advice from parents and others when they face a difficult decision.)

9. SOLVE CONFLICTS FAIRLY

Conflicts go with the territory of family life. They can create anger and other bad

feelings that eat away at relationships. Or, handled well, they can provide important opportunities for families to grow stronger and foster children's character development.

One of the ways we can turn family conflicts to good is to use a fairness approach to solving them. A fairness approach has three parts: (1) achieving mutual understanding; (2) arriving at a fair, agreed-upon solution to the problem; and (3) holding a follow-up meeting to evaluate how the solution is working.

The fairness approach can be used with teens and even with young children. The sooner, the better. As an example of starting early, consider the experience of the mother of Philip, 7, and Ben, 5. She used the fairness approach with her sons to address the chief source of upset in their home: the kids acting badly when she was on the phone. Here's how it went; she began by stating the purpose of the meeting and trying to get mutual understanding of the problem:

Mom: In a fairness meeting the three of us will work together to solve the problem.
 Ben: I don't get it.
 Phillip: If you keep your big mouth shut, you might understand, dummy!
 Ben: You shut up yourself!

The fairness meeting was off to a rocky start. But the mother persisted:

Mom: I want *both* of you to be quiet and listen. Now, the problem is it upsets me when you guys get wild when I'm on the phone and I can't carry on a conversation. What are your feelings about this?"
 Phillip: Are you going to tell Daddy about this?
 Ben: Are you?
 Phillip: I haven't been so bad.

The mother comments: "This type of reasoning on the part of the kids went on for what seemed like an endless time. It was very hard to get the idea of the meeting across to them. I was astonished to see how punishment-oriented they were." But she persevered: "We need to come to an agreement that is fair to all of us. I want to understand your feelings about this problem." Finally, there was a breakthrough:

Phillip: Mom, I really don't like it when you get on the phone and talk so long.
 Ben: Yeah, the other night you talked on the phone when you said you would play a game with us, and then there wasn't time.
 Mom: You feel I spend too much time on the phone?
 Ben: You're not home that much, Mommy, and when you are, you should want to be with me.

"The more we talked," the mother says, "the more I understood their feelings of rejection when I'm on the phone for a long time. I explained that I often do get carried

away—but that with working and going to school and taking care of our home, I hardly have time to see my friends, and this is often my only way of keeping in touch with them."

Once they understood each other's feelings, the mother, Phillip, and Ben were able to brainstorm solutions to the problem. They eventually worked out the following Fairness Agreement, which they all signed and posted:

1. *If Mom has promised to do something with us, she will tell the person she is busy and will call back later.*
2. *We will make a list of things to do while Mom is on the phone.*
3. *Mom will try to make her calls shorter.*
4. *If Mom has to be on the phone for a longer time, she will tell us, and we will behave.*

Two days later, Mom and the boys held a follow-up meeting, the final step in the fairness process. The mother reports: "We agreed we had stuck to our plan. The kids played together or did things independently when I was on the phone, and I made calls shorter. We agreed there has been less arguing and hassling about this problem."

The fairness approach promotes children's moral growth in three ways: (1) It respects them by listening to their feelings; (2) It requires them to take the perspective of others; and (3) It involves them in helping to solve family problems and maintain family harmony. One study found that when parents took a fairness approach to conflicts, their teenagers became more cooperative and more oriented to the needs of others.

10. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE THE VIRTUES

All of the virtues develop through practice. We don't develop goodness in children simply by talking about it. Or as educator John Agresto puts it, "Character development is not a spectator sport."

There are many ways we can provide our children with opportunities to practice the virtues. For starters, we can give them real responsibilities in family life: housework, yardwork, helping to prepare meals and clean up, taking care of younger siblings, and so on. A mother of three sons (ages 2, 4, and 6) says: "The rule in our house is that you get a chore for each year of your age. Our boys are all very proud of what they do." Kids should not be paid for these regular chores; such jobs are the way they contribute to the family. When they get to be school age, they can be given an allowance—a separate matter—as one of the benefits of family life and taught how to spend it wisely.

Another of our children's important responsibilities is to do their best work in school and make the most of their education. Homework is part of that responsibility.

Children should see homework not only as a means of getting good grades but as an opportunity to develop habits of good character such as self-discipline and putting duty before pleasure. They should understand that to do homework shoddily or not at all shows poor self-discipline and a lack of respect for the teacher, who typically has designed the homework to extend or reinforce school learning. Parents can help kids form good homework habits by establishing: (1) a system, such as a daily planner, for keeping track of homework assignments; (2) a homework study time—ideally, the same time each day; and (3) a homework study area where they can work without distraction.

Helping children learn to set and work toward goals develops the virtues of planning, organization, and perseverance. My colleague Michelle Borba interviewed a California father of seven whose children were known to be likeable, courteous, and hard-working. Asked what he did that that might explain why his children turned out so well, he said:

Well, there's one thing I remember doing since my kids were young. Once a month I'd ask each child, "What goal do you have for yourself this month?" I'd try to help them think of something they wanted to achieve. Then we'd talk for a few minutes about what they could do to attain that goal. Every few days I'd check in and ask, "How are you doing? Do you need any help?" As they got older, they started to come to me to tell me their goals. I think these little talks help my kids stay focused on what they wanted to achieve, and usually they were successful. I guess it really helped them to become self-motivated.

11. FOSTER SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

One night, at the end of the graduate course I teach on character education, a student stayed to talk. He said he lifted weights competitively but that it was increasingly difficult to compete because so many people in the sport use steroids. I asked how athletes could continue to use steroids when everything you read says that steroids can make you sterile, cause cancer, and do other terrible things to your body.

He said, "People know all that, but they don't care." The professor in one of his physical education courses had recently shown a videotape which reported the results of a survey of amateur weight-lifters, collegiate and post-collegiate. The survey posed this question: "If you could take a drug that would guarantee you'd win every competition for five years, but at the end of five years the drug would be certain to kill you, would you take that drug?" A majority of the weight-lifters said yes.

If we ask ourselves, "How is it that a significant number of young people in our society would trade their very lives for five years of drug-dependent success?", the answer comes back: They are spiritually adrift. As one mother said, upon hearing the results of that survey: "Those young men don't know why they're here."

Our children need to know why they're here. Teen suicide has more than tripled in the past three decades. There are lots of reasons for that, but among them is a lack of the sense of purpose that makes life worth living. All young people have a deep need to know the meaning of life and the purpose of their own particular lives.

Now, there are different ways to answer ultimate questions such as, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What is the significance of *my* life?" Some of us will give non-religious answers to those questions; we may find our purpose simply in making a positive difference in the lives of others. We hope that the world, in some way, will be a better place for our having been here. For others, the answers to life's largest questions will be rooted in a religious world view, the belief in a loving God who has given each of us particular gifts and who has a special purpose for every person on the face of the earth.

For persons who may have a religious world view, it is worth knowing what the research shows: Young people who frequently attend religious services, who say that religion is important to them, and who belong to religious denominations that explicitly prohibit drug use are more likely to avoid drug involvement than their less religiously engaged peers. Likewise for teen sexual activity, single parenthood, and delinquent behavior; those teens who most often attend religious services have the lowest rates of these problems. One of the ways religion deters adolescents' involvement in self-injurious or anti-social behaviors is by influencing them to choose friends who do not engage in those activities.¹⁶

Studies of adults produce similar findings. Dr. Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, points out in his book *Authentic Happiness*: "Religious Americans are clearly less likely to abuse drugs, commit crimes, divorce, and kill themselves. They are also physically healthier and live longer . . . Religions instill hope for the future and create meaning in life."¹⁷

At a talk I gave to parents, one mother asked: "What if you're not sure what you believe about God? I'm not. But I'm at the point of thinking I should expose my children to church. They won't be able to make an informed decision about this if they've never been exposed to it, but I don't know to tell them about what I believe." I said she should tell them the truth: that she's not sure what she believes but wants them to have an experience of going to church that will help them someday decide for themselves.

Whether we find our purpose for living through a religious or non-religious path, we want to be sure to encourage our children to craft a life of noble purpose. If they do not, they are likely to be carried along by the culture—and may end up making a god of money, sex, prestige, power, or, as in the case of the weight-lifters, success at any price.

In the spiritual domain, as in all areas, our children will remember the example we set. We can't give what we haven't got. Mary, a young mother who is devout in her own

faith, recalls her father:

Dad always closes his letters with, "Work hard and pray a lot." This never sounds phony because it's what he does. He has worked hard all his life. He built the two homes we lived in and did all the repairs. And he prays throughout the day. My most powerful image of my father is of catching him kneeling at the foot of his bed, late at night before he retired, saying his personal prayers.

A caveat: Even parents who do all the right things—make character development a high priority, love their children, set a good example, discipline wisely, foster spiritual development—will still find raising children the toughest job on earth. Our children will make mistakes growing up, just as we did.

When our sons were teenagers, I took them to see a live performance of Bill Cosby at the Landmark Theater in nearby Syracuse, New York. In one routine, Cosby acted out the scene in Genesis in which God gives his first children, Adam and Eve, just one rule—"Don't eat the apples on that tree"—and they promptly disobey it. "All you parents out there," Cosby said with a chuckle, "if you have trouble getting your kids to obey, don't get discouraged—remember that God had a hard time, too."

That said, it's our job as parents to make the most of the many opportunities we have to help our children grow to be strong and good people. For the process of developing character begins, like everything else, in the home.

¹ Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's hope: What works for the American high school*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

² Robert Evans, "Family Matters: The Real Crisis in Education," *Education Week* (May 22, 2002), 48.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ James Stenson, *Upbringing: A Handbook for parents of young children*. www.ParentLeadership.com

⁶ Diana Baumrind, "Early socialization and adolescent competence," in S. E. Dragastin and G. H. Elder (Eds.), *Adolescence in the life cycle* (New York: Wiley, 1975).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lawrence Steinberg, B. Brown, and S. M. Dornbusch, *Beyond the classroom: Why school reform failed and what parents must do*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁹ Johann Christoph Arnold, *Endangered: Your Child in a Hostile World* (Plough Publishing Co., 2000).

- ¹⁰ Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam, *On Becoming Childwise* (Parent-Wise Solutions, Inc.)
- ¹¹ Dolores Curran, *Stress and the healthy family* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985).
- ¹² Amy Welborn, "Since when does indecent exposure not harm kids?", *Our Sunday Visitor* (June 23, 2002).
- ¹³ *America's youth: Measuring the risk*. (Washington, D. C.: The Institute for Youth Development, 2002).
- ¹⁴ Coach John Wooden, *Wooden: A lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1997), 6-7.
- ¹⁵ Originally published by the Christian Action Council but no longer in print.
- ¹⁶ J. M. Wallace and D. R. Williams, "Religion and adolescent health-compromising behavior." In J. Schulenberg et al. (Eds.), *Health risks and developmental transitions during adolescence*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ¹⁷ Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).